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ABSTRACT

While English-speaking businesspeople may have difficulty learning Japanese, they can improve communication skills with Japanese nationals by placing more emphasis on body language and etiquette. This knowledge can supplement limited verbal skills in Japanese and promote communication in all-English conversations. Body language, or gestures, are of three types: instinctive, semiotic, and paralinguistic. Gestures that have become formalized in Japan and acquired meanings other than those intended or understood by English-speakers include the smile, bow, and certain specific hand gestures. Some common gestures may have no intrinsic meaning to westerners but need to be understood. In addition, derogatory gestures are generally made only to a third party. Aspects of Japanese etiquette that are important for the foreigner to acknowledge include the fact that the Japanese generally do not touch, blow their noses, eat, or behave loudly in public. Dress is more formal, business cards are essential, and such behaviors as seeing people off at a train station or airport, patience, keeping adequate personal distance, close attention in conversations, and addressing individuals appropriately are also important. Specific behaviors are proper in a Japanese family situation. While sources of information about Japanese gestures are rare, books and software teach Japanese etiquette. (MSE)

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JAPAN: BODY LANGUAGE AND ETIQUETTE AS A MEANS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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JAPAN: BODY LANGUAGE AND ETIQUETTE AS A MEANS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

When working, studying and doing business abroad one invariably encounters communication problems based on language and/or cultural differences. In Japan the difficulties are particularly acute because the real or perceived cultural gap seems enormous and learning the language presents a formidable task for most Westerners. Japanese is not related to any of the Indo-European languages, thus there are no cognates to aid the Westerner and, of course, the grammatical structure is quite different. Even the many English words, which have recently become part of the Japanese language, are often not understood by native speakers of English when they are pronounced in the Japanese manner. In addition the Westerner has to learn the expressions used only by men, which are different from those used only by women. Japanese honorifics and degrees of politeness are also strange to the Westerner. Standard Japanese, which is the language of the classroom, is often quite different from colloquial

Japanese. Then one must contend with the regional dialects as well.[1]

Learning to read Japanese is a most difficult and time consuming task mastered by relatively few Westerners. In addition to learning two syllabaries, one must also learn a minimum of nearly 2,000 kanji, or Chinese characters. An educated Japanese must know a substantial number beyond the basic 2000 characters.[2] How can a business person planning on making several trips to, or living in, Japan acquire the necessary communication skills?

Most business people do not have the time to take regular Japanese classes. Company crash courses or private tutoring will help, but because of the difficulties of mastering a language as different as Japanese, one can not reasonably expect much more than survival tourist Japanese. Even then there are dangers. For example, in the classroom we learn that anata means you and we use it as often in Japanese as we do in English, but it is not normal to address a senior person with anata, and it is not even used often with people of equal social standing. We also learn that konichi wa means "hello, good-day" and konban wa means "good evening". What we often do not learn is that these are casual greetings used only "...in what can be called 'irregular' encounters, which do not recur."[3] In a working or home situation they would not be used, although some younger Japanese are beginning to use these expressions in

the Western way. The more conservative do not say konban wa when they come home to their family at night. A Western sales representative may wish to impress the manager of a Japanese company in the lobby of a hotel with his/her Japanese by saying: "Konban wa, Suzuki-san", "Good evening, Mr Suzuki". Here we have a double faux pas. Konban wa is too casual, and one does not use names with greetings in Japanese.[4] Although the Japanese may appreciate the attempt of the Westerner to speak Japanese, he/she may also be affected negatively if the greeting is used incorrectly.

Naturally it could be argued that Japanese business people and officials can speak English, and therefore the Western speaker of English need not bother learning Japanese. This is an arrogant and linguistically chauvinistic attitude which in no way can be justified in dealings with a country having the cultural, technological and economic stature of Japan. It also goes without saying that such an attitude will not produce the best possible business or diplomatic atmosphere.

Given the difficulty of learning the Japanese language, what can the Western business person to do improve communication skills? One possiblity is to place more emphasis on body languge and etiquette. Some Japanese courses treat certain aspects of etiquette, but most seem to neglect body language. A Westerner versed in Japanese body language and etiquette will be better prepared to

communicate culturally with the Japanese even if his/her linguistic competence is not up to par. It may be possible to miss the verbal aspect of what the Japanese person is saying but nevertheless get a feeling of what is being said based on body language. Non-verbal communication doubtlessly plays an important role in all cultures. Body language and more specifically gestures, plus basic etiquette are more manageable than linguistic competence because they are more limited in number and usually do not require the complex skills necessary for verbal communication. In verbalization, the slightest phonological, morphological or syntactic mistake creates an accent or error whereas gestures and etiquette are more flexible. Perhaps it is because of this flexibility, or the fact that they are visual and more manageable, or perhaps it is because they seem to provide a more direct route to intercultural communication: for whatever reason, gestures and etiquette seem to generate much more interest and enthusiasm in the classroom.

A knowledge of body language and etiquette will not only supplement the limited verbal Japanese skills of the Westerner, but will also help promote communication even if the entire conversation is held in English. Depending on their English background, their exposure to Western culture, and their own willingness and ability to adapt, native Japanese are bound to carry over some, if not all aspects of

their native body language and etiquette when speaking English. With a knowledge of non-verbal communication, the Westerner will understand his/her Japanese partner better, there will be fewer misinterpretations and the Westerner can capatilize on his/her knowledge of Japanese gestures and etiquette, which will foster better cross-cultural communication.

What is body language? Body language, also known as kinesics, is basically gestures. Bolinger divides gestures into three groups: instinctive, semiotic, and paralinguistic.[5]

Instinctive gestures are automatic reactions to some outside stimulus, such as blinking when being struck near the eyes, bowing to show submission, leaning forward to catch a sound, smiling when happy, crying when sad, et cetera. These gestures are not learned. They are either automatic or acquired with only a slight social push. Bolinger further points out that all these gestures acquire a social significance and are subject to local modifications. One may bow and not mean to show submission, one may smile to please rather than to show joy and weep when one is really not sad. The modifications and pretenses are what make it difficult to always interpret correctly the meanings of gestures when they are performed by members of another culture.[6]

Semiotic gestures have meanings arbitrarily given them by a given cultural group. They may stand for words or even whole sentences. Hand gestures are a good example, such as the hand held palm up, the fingers cupped beckoning which means "come here" in English. The same meaning in Japanese is expressed by holding the hand with the palm down, keeping in mind that this gesture is not to be used with superiors. Since this gesture could be confused with our way of waving "good-bye", we see that an understanding of Japanese gestures is important. To add to the confusion, some of the younger Japanese have adapted the English way.

Paralinguistic gestures accompany speech much the way that intonation accompanies speech. While emphasizing a negative statement, a native speaker of English may well shake his/her head back and forth or up and down when emphasizing a positive statement.[7]

Let us look at some of the gestures, the smile, for example. Japanese smile when they are happy or giving a friendly acknowledgement, but they may also smile when we would frown. Richie points out that we have externalized the smile and called it the social-smile. In Japan the smile has become internalized and can be seen even when the person smiling thinks he/she is unobserved. "He races for the subway door, let us say. It closes in his face. His reaction to this disappointment is almost invariably a smile. This smile does not mean happiness. No one is happy to have

missed a subway. It does, however, mean cheerful acceptance."[8] The Japanese believe it is important not to express emotions which might upset social harmony.

The smile is also used as a means to protect privacy:

> Suppose that when you invite Mr. Tominaga and his wife to dinner, he replies that he will come but he will not be able to bring his wife. If you ask him why and he smiles but does not answer, then you should not pursue the matter. It means he does not want to tell you exactly why he will not bring her. He smiles instead of saying "I'm sorry, but that is a private matter."[9]

Chances are, it is because of some misfortune and the guest may not want to burden the host with this unpleasant news.

The bow, which originally had the meaning of submission, has now become formalized and is still performed as a sign of respect. Almost everyone knows the Japanese bow often. Just how often do they bow? A recent study showed that an employee working for a large manufacturer bowed 123 times on a given day.

> Priests at the Honganji Temple in Tsukiji in Tokyo said that they bowed on the average 150 times a day. A conductor on a commuter train of thirteen coaches bows each time he checks a ticket, for a daily average of 2,132 times. And

> even this record was surpassed by the elevator girls in a certain Ginza department store who estimated they bent from the waist to everyone boarding and leaving the elevator for a winning total of 2,560 times a day.[10]

The study further states that:

> ... women bow 35 percent more frequently than men and, on roads and neighborhood streets, acquaintances begin to bow when they come within about twenty meters of each other. The time consumed by women in bowing is usually 1.4 seconds while men are faster with only 0.9 seconds. [11]

The 45 degree bow is very formal and not used so often. The 30 and 15 degree bows are more common. Normally the junior person will bow more deeply than the senior person. If there is a large difference in rank, the senior person may perhaps only nod with the head. For the standing bow, men will have their hands at the side of their legs, women may have their hands at the front of their legs. The bow from the formal seiza sitting position must also be performed according to form.

When bowing, one should not straighten up too soon. This may cause a problem, for when you are bowing with your eyes down it is not easy to see what your partner is doing. The trick seems to be to bow at a slight angle and steal a glance to see if your partner is beginning to straighten up.

Looking at some semiotic gestures we can see potential problems. Some gestures seem almost universal, but how they are perceived may vary considerably. For example, consider the gesture of the circle made by the thumb and the index finger.

> In America this means OK, based on an assumption that a circle is "perfect"; in France, however, the same gesture means just the opposite -- the meaning is "worthless" because a circle is also a zero. And in Greece the gesture is an insult because it refers to an unmentionable, if circular, orifice in the body of the onlooker. In Japan, however, it means (coins being round) money.
>
> The visiting American, Frenchman or Greek would all read this identical Japanese gesture "wrongly," with results which could be anything from amusing to disastrous. The signal sent out is not the signal received.[12]

To indicate drinking, southern Europeans will often raise the head, then extend the thumb and perhaps the small finger miming drinking out of a wine bottle. "The Japanese lowers his head and makes a half-circle with thumb and index finger in front of his mouth, then suddenly tilts the whole hand. ... the Japanese is miming drinking from a sake cup.[13]

Many Europeans indicate eating by bunching the fingers and circulating them in front of the mouth. The Japanese do it with two outstreched fingers imitating chopsticks. This gesture might be confused with the gesture for "I would like to smoke".

Other gestures might not be understood at all. The holding up of the small finger, which originally meant "baby" now usually means "girlfriend." The extended thumb, which means "good" in English, means "boss" or "boyfriend" in Japanese.[14]

A typical way to indicate "oneself" is for Japanese to point to their nose with the index finger, whereas the American might use the hand or thumb to the chest. "Pointing to one's heart with the entire hand indicates "confidence".[15]"

Two people (usually children or parents with children) hooking small fingers, yubi kiri indicate making an agreement or promise.

For "no" the hand is waved in front of the face with the thumb edge of the hand towards the face.

Making a fist, raising the head and putting the nose into the fist, hana ga takai is used to indicate someone who is conceited.

Placing the fist in front of the mouth with the thumb and index finger towards the mouth and throwing open the fingers (usually twice) means either (1) donaru shout at,

cry out in anger (usually accompanied by an angry facial expression), or (2) yoku shaberu or kuchi ga karui, to blab a secret.

Crossing and hitting the right and left index fingers (usually twice) refers to a fight or a strained relationship.

The right hand moving up and down with the thumb facing the head is used to excuse oneself when one must cross in front of someone else, or as an apology for comming late, inconveniencing someone, et cetera.

A crossing and hitting of the forearms means dame desu, it is not possible or not allowed.

A hooked index finger means someone is a crook.

"A thumb placed between the index finger and middle finger refers to the sexual act, or female organ. The American children's game, "I got your nose!" should not be played in Japan."[16]

"There are three gestures the Japanese use, for the most part unconsciously, which indicate awkwardness, hesitation, dismay or predicament [or embarrasment]

Innaling air audibly through clenched teeth.

Scratching the back of one's head.

Hitting one's open palm lightly against the forehead."[17]

"The thumb end of the fist is shaken near the face to indicate that someone is gatchiri or katai with his money --

both gesture and meaning being covered, in this case, by an identical English term: tight-fisted."[18]

When Japanese use their fingers to count, they start with an open right hand and close first the thumb, then the index finger, etc. For seven, they hold the left hand up and open and place the first two fingers of the right hand in the palm of the left.

Richie[19] also makes the interesting observation that derogatory gestures in Japanese are quite different from those of Western languages in that Westerners use derogatory or vulgar gestures to directly address the onlooker, whereas the Japanese usually use them to refer to third parties not present. Such gestures are used in Japan by men. It would be improper for women to do so because it is not lady-like.

> Silence is not a gesture in a strict sense, but is used by Japanese in different ways and often signifies things other than what British people might interpret it to mean. Silence <u>per se</u> is not a sign of negative or hostile feelings. It is often employed deliberately to indicate thoughtfullness and quiet appreciation. A 'wise' person in Japan is supposed to speak slowly, quietly and with many pauses.[20]

Let us now take a look at Japanese etiquette. Every society has rules of etiquette which will vary according to social strata and the occasion at hand. Most of the time,

what is considered proper behavior in Japan and in the West will be the same. We often dwell on the differences, because that is where the pitfalls lie. While investigating these differences, let us keep in mind, that the similarities outweigh the differences. By focusing on the differences we do not want to create the false impression that the Japanese live on a another planet. Nevertheless, if we are not aware of certain aspects of Japanese etiquette we may sometimes inadvertently shock the sensibilities of many Japanese.

Japanese are, for example, not publicly tactile. Slapping on the back, taking someone by the arm, hugging and kissing can be very unsettling to Japanese. Although some young, modern Japanese can be seen holding hands in public, such acts are best avoided.

Japanese try not to blow their noses in the presence of others, and when they do blow their noses, they use two hands and paper tissues. The handkerchief is used to mop one's brow, wipe hands, etc. The sight of a Westerner blowing his/her nose with one hand in a handkerchief and the accompanying noise may strike the Japanese as hilarious behavior.

Mature adults eating food on the street, e.g. an ice-cream cone or a doughnut, will cause people to stare.

Dress in Japan tends to be more formal than in many Western countries. Americans in particular must take care not to dress too casually or in poor taste.

Loud behavior and gawking are much more restricted in Japan and best avoided.

A meishi or calling card is not merely convenient in Japan, it is extremely important, not only for business people but for social contacts as well. The card not only provides the caller's name and address, it also reveals the social status of the caller which permits the caller to be given due respect. As is also the case when presenting gifts, the meishi should be presented with two hands if possible. The card should be carefully inspected and then put away carefully at an unnoticed moment.[21]

Seeing people off at the train station or airport is very important to the Japanese. The Westerner should be sure to see a Japanese friend off and kindly accept the offer to be seen off even if the Westerner does not consider it important. The Westerner must also make sure to wait until the person has actually departed, otherwise the Japanese will not feel as if they have been properly seen off.

Business people in Japan should realize that the hard sell approach combined with self praise does not sit well with the Japanese. It is better to be patient and endure what the Westerner perceives as irrelevant small talk. At

the same time the Western business person should not stand too close to his/her conversation partner.

The Westerner should not be insulted if the Japanese offers no excuse when declining an invitation. We in the West seem to feel obligated to tell our prospective host why we cannot accept an invitation and may feel slighted if the Japanese simply says, "I cannot" or "Sorry, I am busy", with no slight intended.[22]

Japanese may be offended if they feel the Westerner is not listening to them. The problem arises because the back-channeling or aizuchi are different in Japanese and English. "Short words such as ... (hai, ee, soo desu ne, naruhodo, etc.), or nodding appear after almost each phrase, sentence or group of sentences uttered by the other participant. The frequency is much higher than in English. It is impolite to imply, by not using aizuchi, that you are not de facto listening."[23] The habit of nodding and bowing is so ingrained in the Japanese that secretaries can be observed nodding and bowing when talking to their bosses over the telephone!

When calling on a Japanese bureaucrat or businessman, take note of how far he accompanies you when you depart. The greater the distance, the greater the respect.[24]

It is not common to be too friendly and engage in personal conversations with clerks in a Japanese department store. Conversely, some Western clerks may consider the

Japanese rude for ignoring them and treating them as a non-person.[25]

A Japanese may also think nothing of getting into the back seat if you offer him/her a ride. In the West this would be considered rude since it would indicate you are somehow only a chauffeur.[26]

Don't bargain in Japan. Many Westerners think that bargaining is a way of life in Asia and try to bargain in Japan where it is not done.

What should you call a Japanese? It is not at all common to call a Japanese by his/her first name. Even fairly close friends in Japan are likely to use family names. Children in school are already addressed by their family names. Use the family name and add -san which means "Mr, Mrs, Miss or Ms". If the person has a title, e.g. sensei, for "teacher, doctor", use that title. Do not feel slighted if Japanese do not feel comfortable calling you by your first name since it goes against their tradition. It is amusing to hear the American President proudly announce he is on a first name basis with the Japanese Prime Minister. The President should realize that this goes counter to Japanese tradition and that the Prime Minister is doing it only to humor him.

When visiting a family there are many things to know. It is considered better manners to take off the coat and hat before entering the house. In the entrance hall one removes

the shoes, either leaving them pointed towards the interior of the house where the maid or hostess will rearrange them with the toes pointing toward the door, or this may be done by the guest. "A guest must never turn his or her back on the host or hostess while removing shoes, and only the hand should be used in arranging them, never the foot."[27] If you are given slippers, which will invariably be too small and rather uncomfortable for Western males, put them on but remove them when entering a traditional Japanese room with tatami mats. When entering the toilet, remove the house slippers and put on the special toilet slippers. Speaking of toilets, if you want the toilet do not use the euphemism "bathroom". If you ask your startled hostess for the bathroom, she may well assume that you want to take a bath and she may be unprepared for such a request.

Sitting on one's legs in the formal <u>seiza</u> position must be learned. Sitting in this position for any length of time is normally quite painful for Westerners, so Japanese usually do not expect it. Men may sit cross-legged but women must not sit cross-legged but rather with the legs folded along rather than under the body. Whether sitting in a chair or on the floor the main thing to remember is not to slouch.

When visiting a Japanese family it is proper to thank them again for any past favors and to bring them a present. While flowers may be allright, they are not so common as in the West, perhaps because of their connection with funerals

or sickness. If you do not know which flowers are for happy or neutral occasions and which are for condolences, it might be best not to give flowers. The gift should not be too expensive because the Japanese will feel obligated to return a gift of similar value at some future date. On the other hand, it should not look cheap or be too cheap. Something from one's home country is nice, although in America it is sometimes difficult to find something that is not made in Japan, Korea or Taiwan. The wrapping of the gift is very important to the Japanese, perhaps as important as the contents. Traditionally, "... gifts are wrapped in white paper and tied with mizuhiki, which is a special paper cord for the purpose."[28]

> Ordinarily the paper is wrapped so that the last fold comes on top of the package at the right-hand edge with the end of the paper extending all the way to the left-hand edge of the package. For unhappy occasions, however, the wrapping is reversed....[29]

Obviously one has to be careful not to send a gift wrapped for an unhappy occasion when it should be for a happy occasion and vice versa. It is also better if the gift does not contain four or nine items. "One word for 'four' is shi, which also means death, while the word for nine also means suffering."[30]

If all this seems complex, let it be known that we have only scratched the surface. So many things can be said about table manners that they are beyond the scope and time limit of this paper. A Westerner might begin to wonder if it would not be easier to learn the language. However, let us remember that linguistic competence is only one part of communicative competence. We must be aware of the culture of the people with whom we are talking if we wish to have complete communication. The study of body language and etiquette should not be regarded as a substitute for learning the language but rather as an equally important part of communicative competence.

The business person or government employee going to Japan knows where he/she can study the language, where books and tapes can be bought, but where does one learn about body language and etiquette? Finding out about body language is not always so easy. To my knowledge there is no illustrated book which thoroughly discusses Japanese gestures. The material must be gleaned from various books on general Japanese culture. It is also difficult to find out about gestures from native speakers. It is not that the native speakers do not know the gestures, but rather that they have not been taught the gestures in a formal way and have likely not ever been asked to describe them in detail. Most native speakers will not even be consciously aware of many of the gestures they use every day.

The study of etiquette is easier. There are several books which treat the subject in detail. There is also computer software available which will coach the prospective visitor to Japan on proper etiquette in given situtations. The software is fun because it allows the learner to actively participate in the process of acculturation. Native instructors are also usually conscientiously aware of etiquette and will be able to comment with a contrastive analysis in proportion to their exposure to Western culture. Another possible learning exprience would be for a company to hire a consultant and hold a weekend seminar for employees going to Japan. Extensive use could be made of videos, comuputers and role playing. It is my firm belief that a person with a basic knowledge of Japanese body language and etiquette will posess a greatly enhanced position for cultural communication with or without an extensive knowledge of the language.

Notes

[1] J. V. Neustupny, Communicating with the Japanese (Tokyo: The Japan Times, 1987) 158.

[2] Neustupy 158.

[3] Neustupny 128.

[4] Neustupny 128.

[5] Dwight Bolinger, Aspects of Language (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968) 13-15.

[6] Bolinger 14.

[7] Bolinger 14-15.

[8] Donald Richie, A Lateral View Essays on Comtemporary Japan (Tokyo: The Japan Times, 1987) 64.

[9] Jack Seward, More About the Japanese, 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Yohan Publications, 1988) 204.

[10] Seward 182.

[11] Seward 182.

[12] Richie 63.

[13] Richie 65.

[14] Richie 67.

[15] Theodore F. Welch, Hiroki Kato, Japan Today (London: Sphere Books, 1987) 58.

[16] Welch, Kato 58.

[17] Welch, Kato 59.

[18] Richie 68.

[19] Richie 69.

[20] Welch, Kato 59.

[21] Neustupny 132.

[22] Seward 205.

[23] Neustupny 104.

[24] Seward 197.

[25] Neustupny 106.

[26] Neustupny 13.

[27] Young Women's Christian Association, Japanese Etiquette (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1987) 14-15.

[28] YWCA 42.

[29] YWCA 43.

[30] Seward 187.

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